

Of Kent State, *Old Yeller*, and *Harlem Summer*:

Recalling the Beginnings of Young Adult Literature in Academe

Spring, 1970. Forever this will be Kent State Spring to me, the spring when on May 4, National Guardsmen shot and killed four protesting undergraduates at the Ohio university, the spring when, at my own alma mater, faculty allowed students to wrap up their courses independently rather than attend class for the final ten days.

But alongside my Kent State Spring is my adolescent lit spring. In January, I—a post-master's-degree student at the University of Virginia—and 20 or 25 others, mostly undergraduates, enrolled in Bob Small's EDUC 144: Literature for Adolescents. Small, a doctoral student, was in the latter stages of writing his dissertation (1970), which I learned was a qualitative analysis of young adult literature.

Small's study, adopting in some respects the methods and instruments used by Stephen Dunning (*A Definition of the Role of the Junior Novel Based on Analyses of Thirty Selected Novels*, 1959), was designed to distinguish between the excellent, the okay, and the not-so-hot books for adolescents of the era featuring major African American characters. Books such as Lipsyte's *The Contender* (1967) earned high ratings in his study, while Newell's *A Cap for Mary Ellis* (1953) did not.

My own dissertation (1972), which examined how the race of characters in a short story affected the responses of teenage readers, was inspired by Bob Small's study on the one hand and by my rapidly developing interest in response theory on the other. Bob Small convinced me and others that it was important

to get more quality books by and about Black Americans into classrooms, while James R. Squire (*The Responses of Adolescents While Reading Four Short Stories*, NCTE, 1964) made it clear that both reader characteristics and textual characteristics shaped reader responses.

At the time, you should know, no one used the term *African American*.

Four years earlier, alongside Biscayne Bay at Miami Military Academy (MMA), I had taught English for the first time. I was an under-trained, under-licensed beginner, a graduate of a flagship university with a mediocre GPA. For the next three years, slowly but surely, I found my sea legs as a teacher.

In October 1966, the MMA librarian, aware that I was teaching an abridged version of *Great Expectations* to three classes of freshmen, lent me a copy of *English Journal* with, of all things, an article on how to engage kids with Dickens and his works. Things started looking up, though I still wasn't exactly turning kids onto reading as I had hoped.

Later that year, I scraped together enough money to supply my lone junior class with copies of *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1964). We closed our anthologies once and for all on the Fireside Poets and Southwest Humorists. From that class of juniors, I had the jaw-dropping experience of speaking with a bright kid who confided in me that *Catcher in the Rye* was, indeed, the first book—maybe he said *real book*—that he had ever read all the way through.

For the next two years, I taught seventh and

eighth grades at the selective Ransom School in Coconut Grove southwest of downtown Miami. It merged some years later with Everglades School for Girls, and today, as Ransom-Everglades, it is one of the top independent schools in the Southeast. In 1967, Ransom's small English department had become part of what we now call the Paperback Revolution. We realized that we might assign books, specific titles we wanted to teach our kids, rather than depend on Scott-Foresman or other publishers to put our curriculum together for us. For my first year at Ransom, I went along happily with what was in place for seventh and eighth grade—*The Call of the Wild* (London, 1963), *Captains Courageous* (Kipling, 1964), and others. The following year, my third as a teacher, I added *Born Free* (Adamson, 1960) to the seventh-grade booklist and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Twain, 1964) to the eighth. For my seventh-graders, I paired *Call of the Wild* and *Born Free* in order to teach some basic differences between fiction and nonfiction. The result, a two-week exploration of the two books, was an instructional unit, though I'm not sure I knew to call it that.

Along the way, I discovered Scholastic's book clubs. My kids bought these books by the bunch, it seemed, but I didn't regard such reading as part of my curriculum. I'm sure my students didn't either. I also used, in both grades, a radical new poetry anthology, *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle and Other Modern Verse* (Dunning, Lueders, & Smith, 1966). My savvy department chair Dan Bowden liked what my own students called "the pickle book" so much that he decided to use it with his seniors. What attracted him, I believe, was the fact that the editors had selected modern poems, many by living poets, and that each poem had room to breathe on the page, sometimes alongside appealing photographs, rather than being crammed four to a page, a common arrangement in anthologies then.

During my first year at Ransom, I had another breakthrough. Visiting a used bookstore in South Miami, I stumbled onto a well-used copy of Hook and Evans's *The Teaching of High School English*, its third edition (1965; currently available in its 5th edition from 1982). Until then, I was only vaguely aware that there was such a thing as *method* or, better yet, that someone had written *methods* (plural) down.

Early in 1970, a full-time graduate student now, I

was primed for learning more about books written for teenagers and for the keen professional insights provided by Bob Small directly or by way of the professional readings he assigned—G. Robert Carlsen (*Books and the Teenage Reader*,

1967), Daniel Fader (*Hooked on Books: Program and Proof*, 1968), and Dwight Burton (*Literature Study in the High School*, 1965). *Hooked on Books*, in particular, was as compelling to me as any page-turner on the bestseller list.

It recounted Fader's experiences in introducing trade paperbacks to teachers and students in a Washington, D.C. junior high school. (Haven't read it? Now is the time. Be sure to follow up with *The Naked Children* (1971), an intimate account of Fader's relationship with a group of teenagers at the school.)

The books we bought for class ranged in price from 45 cents to \$1.25, with most under a dollar. I read, in no particular order, *Street Rod* (Felsen, 1963), *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (Hunter, 1968), *Harlem Summer* (Vroman, 1968), *Old Yeller* (Gipson, 1956), *Shane* (Schaefer, 1949), *Trappers of the West* (Reinfeld, 1964; and yes, 45 cents!), *Up a Road Slowly* (Hunt, 1956), *Seventeenth Summer* (Daly, 1942), *The Contender* (Lipsyte, 1967), *A Separate Peace* (Knowles, 1961), *His Enemy, His Friend* (Tunis, 1967), and, of course, *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) and *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968).

On Monday, May 4, though, everything academic—adolescent lit, 19th-century Russian literature in translation, contemporary drama, you name it—lurches to an angry halt. At UVA, term papers and final exams were swept aside by demonstrations over peace and war, Kent State, the draft, and body bags.

By the following spring, a somewhat calmer time, I was a doctoral candidate myself under the sage tutelage of Richard Meade. My dissertation data were in hand, I was interviewing for higher education positions in English education, and—in my capacity as a graduate assistant—I taught my first adolescent literature class for UVA at its Northern Virginia Center in Fairfax.

That was early in 1971. I have taught adolescent literature courses, now at Columbus State University,

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ever since. I became an ALAN member as soon as I knew of its existence, probably in 1974. Recalling my personal experiences in discovering and then teaching

others about the novels of Judy Blume, Paul Zindel, Katherine Paterson, and—in the 1980s—a new generation of writers (Chris Crutcher, Lois Lowry, Norma Fox Mazer, Walter Dean Myers), I realized that others with *emeritus* after their names were soon to wrap up careers as YAL specialists experi-

enced the field “from the bottom up,” one might say. We were not its true pioneers, but we were at least their sons and daughters.

I discussed those 1960s–1970s experiences with four long-term acquaintances: Guy Ellis, editor of the *ALAN Review* (1977–1982), now retired from the University of Georgia; Terry Ley, former member of the ALAN Board of Directors, retired from Auburn University; Mike Angelotti, English education professor at the University of Oklahoma and the chair of the Fountain of the Muse poetry reading at NCTE conventions; and Don Gallo, whose well-known contributions to ALAN I will touch on below.¹

First, I called W. Geiger (Guy) Ellis, another University of Virginia product who retired from the University of Georgia in 1991. Ellis taught my first methods course in 1967, and I met my wife of 44 years in his class. When I moved to Georgia in 1971, he became my cross-state mentor and, in 1978 when he became editor of *The ALAN Review*, he involved me as a Clip-and-File book reviewer. Ellis became interested in “junior novels” (a common term for adolescent literature in the 1960s) as a graduate student. UVA’s English education icon Richard Meade

had already introduced him to Florida State professor Dwight Burton at an NCTE conference, and Meade encouraged Ellis to pursue the subject as an independent study. Ellis did so with characteristic energy, framing his readings around the work of Burton.

In the mid-sixties, UVA had no adolescent literature course. By 1967, however, Ellis had designed and offered one. Among those who enrolled was Robert C. (Bob) Small, Jr., a teacher at Lane High School in Charlottesville, a future ALAN president (1982), ALAN Award honoree (1995), and *ALAN Review* coeditor (1990–1998 with Patricia Kelly of Virginia Tech). Small started doctoral studies soon thereafter and took over the adolescent literature slot at Virginia from Ellis when he relocated to Georgia in 1967. When Ellis arrived in Athens, he proposed and then taught UGA’s first YAL course.

I also spoke with retired Auburn University professor Terry Ley. Early in the 1960s, Ley was a student at the University of Northern Iowa. As a teenager, he had purchased books through Scholastic’s Teenage Book Club (TAB); he explained recently that, in Cedar Falls, no bookstore sold the kind of books he found appealing. Following graduation in 1961, Ley began his teaching career at Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids. A future colleague, Ken Donelson (ALAN president, 1979; ALAN award honoree, 1983), had taken a year off to work on his dissertation at the University of Iowa. (Ley, in fact, taught in what had been Donelson’s classroom.) On Donelson’s return to Cedar Rapids in 1962, he promoted what was then a decidedly fresh instructional strategy, Directed Individualized Reading (DIR). Before long, Ley reports, DIR was a mainstay of the English curriculum locally and elsewhere in Iowa. At Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids, Ley told me, he “never had to overcome the snootiness about YA literature” others have experienced. So-called junior novels and popular adult fiction were an integral part of the reading/literature program he worked with.

Ley completed his graduate work at the University of Iowa in 1974 under G. Robert Carlsen (recipient, along with Stephen Judy, of the first ALAN Award), who also directed Donelson’s dissertation. Ley then joined the faculty at Auburn University, designed its first adolescent lit course (“The Reading of Adolescents”), and taught there until retiring in 2001. Among Ley’s students were Jim Blasingame (in Cedar Rap-

1. I had hoped to interview Bob Small and Hugh Agee for this piece. Sadly, I learned in 2010 that Hugh, who introduced me to ALAN, was afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease; he passed away in March, 2011. I also tried to correspond with Bob Small for several months, but my efforts to reach him were unsuccessful. He too, I understand, is in poor health.

ids), Pamela (Sissi) Carroll at Auburn, and Steve Bickmore through an NEH Summer Institute at Auburn. Blasingame and Carroll have each served as ALAN president. All three have been editors or coeditors of *The ALAN Review*.

Next I spoke with Don Gallo (ALAN president, 1986; ALAN Award recipient, 1992), who says he was a reluctant reader as a teenager until, at Hope College, he became captivated by *The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway, 1968). Don recalls that he disliked Hemingway's short novel in high school, along with just about everything else involving books. Scouting and athletics were much more to his liking.

Bachelor's and master's degrees in hand in the 1960s, Gallo starting teaching in Westport, Connecticut, public schools, where he became increasingly fascinated by teenagers and their reading—or the lack thereof. During doctoral study at Syracuse University, he took Margaret Early's children's literature course. Aware of his interest in books for teenagers, Early encouraged him to concentrate on recent Newbery winners and writers who were, seemingly out of the blue, ignoring the old taboos and formulas of the prototypical junior novel. Of the body of adolescent literature he discovered in Early's class, Gallo told me, "I jumped on it, and it became a career for me."

Indeed he did, and indeed it did.

Gallo joined the Central Connecticut State University faculty in 1973, where he remained until retiring a quarter-century later. Beginning in the 1980s, Gallo edited a series of short story anthologies. *Sixteen* (1984) was the first. In its introduction, he explained what made the collection unique: it featured never-before-published stories by writers who made their living by writing for teenage readers. Following *Sixteen*, Gallo edited more than a dozen "unique" short-story collections and a collection of one-act plays, each with a different thematic twist. He donates a significant portion of his royalties for these books to ALAN.

Finally, I talked to Mike Angelotti (ALAN president, 1983), whom I met in 1981 at the NCTE convention in Boston. One evening, after a circuitous cab ride, a group of NCTE folks—I among them—found themselves standing in a slow-moving line outside what was known as the no-name seafood restaurant. We were cold and sober, in contrast to the locals, who drank beer from six-packs they kept at their feet and pushed forward as the line inched toward the door.

With Mike Angelotti were Dwight Burton (ALAN Award honoree, 1980) and John Simmons, all from Florida State. Burton was one of my YAL rock stars from my 1970 class with Bob Small at Virginia. I was dazzled to be in his presence.

Mike Angelotti, I was surprised to learn, preceded me by a year or possibly two at Miami Military Academy, where he, too, taught for a year before moving on. Like me, he had not completed a teacher education major as an undergraduate. At MMA, he taught on a temporary Florida certificate.

In graduate study at FSU in the late 1960s, Angelotti enrolled in existing adolescent literature courses while teaching at the campus high school, virtually across the street. Burton, who had shaped his own ideas about reader response alongside Louise Rosenblatt, stressed the necessity of "imaginative entry" into literature. From Burton, Angelotti told me, he learned that teachers must develop "a way of thinking about the importance of the reader in response to literature, whether we call it imaginative entry or *transaction*."

Bingo!

Angelotti put Burton's theories into practice "immediately and often . . . for my high school and junior high students, whether via *The Contender* or *The Outsiders* or *Watermelon Pickle* or, for that matter, *Wuthering Heights* [Brontë, 1965] and *Heart of Darkness* [Conrad, 1961]. . . . Teaching how to teach YAL at Texas Tech a year or two later was natural and exciting." When he and I first crossed paths in 1981, Angelotti was on the faculty at Texas Tech University. He moved to the University of Oklahoma in 1987 as Coordinator of Teacher Education and continues to serve on the graduate faculty there.

Beginnings matter. Beginnings are worth recalling.

My account of how adolescent literature entered my world as a young teacher and graduate student is idiosyncratic. In no way does it pinpoint its birthing and early development at the university level, although I did find out that Terry Ley and Guy Ellis

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designed their universities' first courses in YAL—Ley at Auburn, Ellis at both Virginia and Georgia. This mirrored my own experience at Columbus State University.

So what readers find here are my skewed memories balanced by those of four professionals who, in the past 40 years, contributed greatly to both the discipline of adolescent literature and to ALAN itself. It goes without saying that others—Jeff Kaplan, Louann

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Reid, Terry Lesesne, and Joan Kaywell come to mind—found adolescent literature in their own ways in different parts of the country and at different stages of their own growth as teachers and scholars.

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November, ALAN introduces me to the writers, the books, and the perspectives that, back on my own turf, give me what I need to welcome twenty-first century English and language arts teachers to the genre in all its diversity, complexity, and respect for the world of adolescents and those who tell their stories.

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